

# **'ALL RADICALISATION IS LOCAL'**

## **THE GENESIS AND DRAWBACKS OF AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT**

EGMONT PAPER 84

## **‘ALL RADICALISATION IS LOCAL’**

**The genesis and drawbacks of an elusive concept**

Rik COOLSAET



June 2016

The Egmont Papers are published by Academia Press for Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations. Founded in 1947 by eminent Belgian political leaders, Egmont is an independent think-tank based in Brussels. Its interdisciplinary research is conducted in a spirit of total academic freedom. A platform of quality information, a forum for debate and analysis, a melting pot of ideas in the field of international politics, Egmont's ambition – through its publications, seminars and recommendations – is to make a useful contribution to the decision-making process.



President: Viscount Etienne DAVIGNON

Director-General: Marc OTTE

Series Editor: Prof. Dr. Sven BISCOP



Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations

Address    FPS Foreign Affairs, Rue des Petits Carmes 15, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Phone      00-32-(0)2.223.41.14

Fax         00-32-(0)2.223.41.16

E-mail      info@egmontinstitute.be

Website    www.egmontinstitute.be

All authors write in a personal capacity.

Lay-out: punctilio.be

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.*

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive summary.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The genesis of a concept (2001-2004) .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Towards an EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Pull of a concept .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>CVE, the American twin concept? .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>The three drawbacks of radicalisation and CVE .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Policy recommendations .....</b>	<b>45</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

‘Radicalisation’ is 12 years old. In relation to terrorism, the concept of ‘radicalisation’ has indeed no longstanding scientific pedigree. It is now firmly entrenched at the heart of European and global counterterrorism. But 12 years after its introduction, it remains ill-defined, complex and controversial. It is thus time to assess its added value.

It was originally raised within European police and intelligence circles shortly after the 9/11 attacks and it simply meant ‘anger’. Its rapid ascent started with an internal European Union (EU) counterterrorism document issued in May 2004 that listed potential root causes for this anger, which was exploited by foreign recruiters to draw vulnerable young Europeans into overseas terrorist campaigns.

Terrorist incidents in the Netherlands, Spain and London soon shifted the focus from the external to the domestic realm. Unlike the 9/11 conspirators, the perpetrators did not come from abroad, but were mostly individuals from migrant communities who had grown up in Europe. How did they come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? Something, it was argued, must turn a person from a ‘normal’ individual into a terrorist.

At the point when the concept of radicalisation was embraced, European Commission officials openly acknowledged it was an oversimplification of an extremely complex process that lay at the intersection between individual pathways and a societal context. They were, however, convinced that it offered a good tool for addressing the root causes of the 9/11 and Madrid attacks. Upstream prevention was urgently needed to drain the terrorist breeding ground of disenchantment and grievances. If this were not addressed, the social fabric of Europe would come under increasing strain.

Radicalisation gained a life of its own. It proved irresistible as a concept, but remained characterised by enduring elusiveness. No consensus emerged on its root causes. Competing narratives co-existed from its inception. For some, a wide array of grievances and motivations, ranging from social marginalisation to political exclusion, had to be addressed. For others, ideology was the prime culprit. The latter gradually became the primary prism through which the process of turning an individual into a terrorist was examined – notwithstanding research that indicated the secondary role of ideology and notwithstanding the experience of many front-line prevention workers, who had found that theological or ideological discussions were mostly pointless when dealing with ‘radicalised’ individuals.

The central position acquired by the concept of radicalisation in policy, law enforcement and academia as the holy grail of counterterrorism contributed significantly to a shift in focus from context to individual and ideology. This has been detrimental to

the 'why-terrorism-occurs approach' advocated in terrorism research since the 1970s. Privileging ideology as the main driver of an individual's slide into terrorism led to a disconnection between extremism and its political, social and economic causes. And it came at a price. Radicalisation got embroiled in growing Western public concerns over immigration, integration and Islam. It came to be seen as a unique and contemporary process linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena.

Radicalisation is now part of our daily vocabulary, but the word refers to many realities, and one cannot but conclude that it remains mired in controversy and confusion. The jury is still out as to its added value.

The concept didn't live up to expectations. We have reached a better understanding of the socialisation process leading to extremism that manifests itself in terrorism. But this still doesn't answer the vexingly simple question as to exactly why, how and when some individuals do turn to terrorism while others don't – which would have been a crucial step in identifying terrorists and was one of the factors contributing to the pull of the concept of radicalisation.

With hindsight, it moreover appears that the concept of radicalisation has indeed had major drawbacks, as some warned early on. Due to its ambiguity, it unwittingly helped to consolidate the popular image in the West of Muslims as a suspect community. It reinforced the existing image of Islam as a imported and threatening value system and diasporic communities from Muslim-majority countries as factors external to Western societies.

Finally, 'deradicalisation' programmes and strategies have often amounted to re-inventing the wheel – but with unintended adverse consequences. Better schooling, better housing, countering discrimination and hatred, improved job prospects, etc., have all long been identified as worthy objectives in their own right for creating a more equal and inclusive society. However, under the umbrella of deradicalisation and counterterrorism, they became part of a negative objective (preventing terrorism) instead of a positive endeavour (creating equal opportunities for all).

The concept of radicalisation is by now too entrenched in political and bureaucratic discourse to be easily jettisoned. A first step, however, might be to put it into proper perspective. Radicalisation is to an underlying factor what fever is to illness – a symptom. Sometimes, medicine for fever will alleviate suffering, but as long as the triggering illness is not cured, fever will continue to haunt the patient. In both cases – fever and radicalisation – an adequate diagnosis is crucial in countering the symptom. An inadequate diagnosis will, on the contrary, result in worsening the situation.

# INTRODUCTION

Let's call him 'Tom'. 'Tom' is a US Special Forces Officer. He was part of an important American delegation that entered the premises of the European Commission on 16 June 2010 for the very first EU-US high-level encounter on radicalisation. In the course of the two-day discussions, 'Tom' paraphrased a famous line from the legendary Democrat speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill – 'all politics is local' – as 'all radicalisation is local.'

By then, the concept of 'radicalisation' was widely in use in Europe – although not yet in the United States. But in relation to terrorism, the concept of radicalisation had no longstanding scientific pedigree. It was born as a political construct, originally raised within European police and intelligence circles shortly after the 9/11 attacks and adopted for the first time in an internal EU counterterrorism document in May 2004. The attacks in Madrid, two months before, and in London in July 2005, pushed the concept to centre stage in EU counterterrorism thinking and policies. Unlike the perpetrators of 9/11, these attackers did not come from abroad, but were individuals who grew up in Europe and were often born there. How did they come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? Why were they attracted by extremist ideologies? What made them vulnerable to recruiters? Something, it was argued, must turn a person from a 'normal' individual into a terrorist. Untangling this process became the essence of radicalisation studies and the holy grail of European (and later worldwide) counterterrorism efforts.

More than a decade of research into radicalisation has resulted in a torrent of in-depth studies, profiles and models aimed at conceptualising the process through which an individual turns into a terrorist. But when the scale of Europeans traveling to Syria became public in early 2013, many were nevertheless taken aback, even in countries like the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, which had taken a substantial lead in the field of radicalisation studies and policies. By mid-2014, the Dutch intelligence service AIVD consequently reported that the existing tools focusing upon profiles and indicators had proven to be of only limited use.<sup>1</sup> This observation should come as no surprise. From its inception, the very notion of 'radicalisation' was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon, but also a source of ambiguity, confusion and misuse.

Even 12 years after its inception, radicalisation remains ill-defined, complex and controversial. The same questions of a decade ago are still being asked today. What exactly do we understand by radicalisation? What are its drivers? Are radical ideas a conveyor belt to radical action? How does religion relate to radicalisation? That last

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands. Swarm dynamics and new strength.* The Hague, AIVD (Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service), September 2014, p. 52.

question evidently gained new traction and increased urgency after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016, in the EU counterterrorism community as well as in Member States. The American relabeling of the concept as 'Countering Violent Extremism' made it into an acronym (CVE), but also fails to satisfactorily answer these questions. Both concepts are usually taken for granted and considered self-evident. They are not.

This Egmont Paper deals with the realities behind the terminology we use to come to grips with the issue of terrorism and its policy implications. An examination of these concepts is important because they reflect our perception of reality. In 1928, the American sociologist William Thomas coined a phrase that sociology students worldwide now identify as the 'Thomas theorem': 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' In his autobiography, the well-known Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman Angell clarifies these consequences: 'Opinions about facts are usually more important than the facts themselves, since it is upon the opinions about facts – very often quite erroneous opinions – that men act in shaping their conduct and the world about them'.<sup>2</sup>

Prof. Dr. Rik Coolsaet<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Norman Angell, *After All. The Autobiography of Sir Norman Angell*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1951, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Rik Coolsaet is Full Professor of International Relations at Ghent University (Belgium) and Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations (Brussels). He was invited to join the original European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation (established 2006) and the subsequent European Network of Experts on Radicalisation (ENER). Since 2003, he has been coordinating research on terrorism and radicalisation, which has resulted in several publications, including *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation* (Ashgate, 2011) and *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave* (Egmont Paper 81, Egmont Institute, March 2016).



## THE GENESIS OF A CONCEPT (2001-2004)

The 9/11 attacks made terrorism once more a leading threat to the West. Initially, this was essentially considered an external threat. The West was a target for al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, as well as a 'place for recruitment and logistical support for Jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya', according to Europol, the Europe-wide police office.<sup>4</sup> Its international nature made it stand apart from the other forms of terrorism in the EU, dubbed 'domestic', such as separatist, extreme-left, and animal rights and eco terrorism. The first official EU declaration on terrorism after the 9/11 attacks clearly testified to the external nature of the threat. Under the aegis of the United Nations, the EU affirmed that it would act in solidarity with the United States and that it would take and support:

[...] actions [...] targeted and [...] directed against States abetting, supporting or harbouring terrorists. [...] It is by developing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and by making the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) operational at the earliest opportunity that the Union will be most effective. The fight against the scourge of terrorism will be all the more effective if it is based on an in-depth political dialogue with those countries and regions of the world in which terrorism comes into being.<sup>5</sup>

But soon, counterterrorism experts in the Belgian police and the domestic intelligence service (State Security) started noticing signs of 'radicalisation' among youngsters in immigrant communities, particularly with Moroccan roots. What 'radical' meant precisely was not defined, but it was close to what Europol described as 'toughening' (of Moroccan students in France).<sup>6</sup> The Belgian assessments were shared with colleagues in the Dutch intelligence service (AIVD), who, in the months following the September 2001 attacks, had noticed a parallel trend of recruitment of young Dutchmen by foreign 'fundamental Muslims' who had fought in Afghanistan. In a public report released in December 2002, the AIVD attempted to draw a profile of these youngsters. Many of them were young men of Moroccan origin (age 18 to 31), who were born in the Netherlands or grew up there from early childhood:

These young people are often in search of their identity. They blame Dutch society for not having enough respect for their ethnic and religious community and not in the least for their parents and they themselves. Where other foreign youths opt for a more liberal confirmation of their Islamic belief and

---

<sup>4</sup> *Terrorist activity in the European Union: Situation and trends report (TE-SAT)*. The Hague, Europol, 2 December 2004, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Conclusions and Plan of Action of the Extraordinary European Council Meeting*. Council of the European Union, SN 140/01, 21 September 2001.

<sup>6</sup> TE-SAT 2004, op. cit., p. 30.

attach a lot of value to their social development in the Dutch society and others end up in a criminal environment, these youths find something to hold on to in very radical Islamic beliefs. Former Islamicist fighters who guide them in a recruitment process, give them a sense of self-respect, involvement, brotherhood and identity. They feel that they are involved in a fight between good and bad, which guides them into a certain direction and provides answers to existential questions they are dealing with. For some Muslim youths embracing a radical Islamic faith signifies a clear break with their former criminal existence, a way of life they want to leave behind for good.<sup>7</sup>

This report referred for the very first time explicitly to a hitherto unknown concept of 'radicalisation processes' by which individuals decide 'to travel abroad to participate in or support the jihad'. Radicalisation was part of a recruitment process led by foreigners and aimed at drawing individuals into participation in overseas terrorist campaigns. It was considered a 'long process':

A recruiter requires patience and social-psychological insight to gradually tighten his grip on the recruit and to be able to manipulate him towards a willingness to devote himself to the jihad. The recruitment process is a long process, that starts with making and intensifying the contact, in which the relation starts to look more and more like a recruiter-recruit relationship. Because recruiters have more impact on recruits than the other way around, it seems probable that the initiative for recruitment originates with a recruiter. [...] People recruited in the Netherlands who then travel abroad to participate in an ideological and military training elsewhere or in the Islamicist war, are also a huge threat for the international legal order.<sup>8</sup>

In the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, some European intelligence agencies warned of potential consequences for Europe, contradicting the official American rationale for the war, summarised by George W. Bush as follows: 'We will strike the terrorists abroad so we do not have to face them here at home.'<sup>9</sup> Belgium's State Security was apprehensive that the Iraq War would, on the contrary, boost resentment and unrest among youngsters in the streets of Europe, as indeed police officers in the field soon reported.

As it turned out, the American invasion of Iraq breathed new life into the waning jihadi terrorist scene. A new wave of radicals emerged, angered by the invasion. This wave was labelled 'home-grown'. By adding a layer of frustration within Muslim communities worldwide, it also pushed jihadi terrorism into a new dimension that

---

<sup>7</sup> *Recruitment for the jihad in the Netherlands*. The Hague, AIJD, December 2002, pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 27.

<sup>9</sup> Remarks by President G.W. Bush at Victory 2004 Rally in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 16 October 2004. Available at: [www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/remarks-by-the-president-at-victory-2004-rally-74343082.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/remarks-by-the-president-at-victory-2004-rally-74343082.html).

plugged into the ongoing fragmentation of the al-Qaeda network: a bottom-up dynamic of small self-radicalising groups and individuals, no longer directed by al-Qaeda but subscribing to its ideology. Foreign recruiters were no longer needed (even if this still happened), and recruitment became a more spontaneous local process, evolving through kinship and friendship bonds. The jihadi threat was becoming a decentralised, home-grown patchwork of scattered groups linked by a common world view and opportunistic connections. It thus represented an essentially bottom-up dynamic, increasingly replacing the earlier top-down strategy conducted via foreign recruiters.

Competing narratives on the origins of terrorism were by now cohabitating within EU counterterrorism thinking. The original view of terrorism as an external security challenge was highlighted in the EU's first *European Security Strategy* (ESS), presented by Javier Solana in December 2003. A second narrative co-existed alongside the first, but initially only as a side issue, involving recruitment by foreign extremists. The ESS also mentioned 'alienation of young people living in foreign societies'. That sentence was somewhat puzzling, since the precise meaning of 'foreign societies' was not explicit. Did it concern youngsters living in dire situations outside Europe or did it refer to European youngsters with migrant roots? Probably both. The ESS addressed the realm of external relations, but surprisingly, in a subsequent sentence it also mentioned: 'This phenomenon is also a part of our own society.'<sup>10</sup> That last narrative was soon to gain the upper hand.

The Madrid train bombings of March 2004 enhanced the importance of the home-grown dimension of the terrorist threat. The ensuing EU Declaration on Combating Terrorism still largely described the threat of terrorism as an external one. But the perpetrators did not conform to the (implicit) standard terrorist profile of a 'fundamentalist Muslim' coming from abroad with instructions to organise a terrorist attack. They originated from the important Spanish-Moroccan diaspora, without any proven link to al-Qaeda. With hindsight this was a major boost for what was to become a whole new dimension in European counterterrorism: the identification of 'root causes'.

The Madrid attacks prompted the EU and its Member States to break new ground in their counterterrorism approach by delving into the mechanisms underpinning the recruitment of individuals into terrorism. The Council meeting of March 2004 called for a thorough assessment of 'the factors which contribute to support for, and recruitment into, terrorism'. The groundwork had been laid by the earlier intelligence and police assessments and the discussions within the EU counterterrorism working groups, but now the EU seriously embarked on the 'root causes' approach to terrorism.

---

<sup>10</sup> A secure Europe in a better world. *European Security Strategy*. Brussels, 12 December 2003.

By taking this route, the EU entered uncharted territory. Historically, Member States had always considered terrorism to be a crime that should be tackled through criminal law. 'Root causes', however, not only brought the EU into the realm of prevention, a policy domain that lay by and large within Member States' competence, but also, more importantly, pushed counterterrorism far beyond its traditional security-centred tools of policing, intelligence and law enforcement by linking prevention and security with the ultimate ambition of draining the breeding ground for terrorism. Counterterrorism now became a whole-of-government effort, encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, and stitching it all together in a broadened security agenda.

Only with the passing of time would the implications of blurring the once obvious dividing line between prevention and security, and their respective constituencies, become clear. It led to ambiguities and unintended consequences that still bedevil counterterrorism, prevention and community relations alike.

With the EU embarking upon a root cause trajectory, the United States instead privileged a global manhunt as the main strategy for combating international terrorism. The EU's burgeoning focus on upstream prevention through the identification of the underlying factors that could lead to (recruitment to) terrorism, was generally rejected by the United States, since it considered that speaking of 'root causes' implied condoning certain terrorist acts. The idea of 'roots' was 'a taboo in the Bush administration, with "evil" the only acceptable explanation for the attacks of September 11'.<sup>11</sup> But occasionally American officials nevertheless also ventured into the complex world of root causes of terrorism. In his 11 February 2003 *Worldwide Threat Briefing*, CIA Director George J. Tenet thus opined: 'The numbers of societies and peoples excluded from the benefits of an expanding global economy, where the daily lot is hunger, disease, and displacement – and that produces large populations of disaffected youth who are prime recruits for our extremist foes.'<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, the US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (February 2003) also confirmed the need to address similar 'root causes'. Such statements, however, appeared largely out of sync with the military emphasis on the Global War on Terrorism against the global Islamist insurgency, as the United States portrayed their foe.

Immediately after the Madrid bombings, a closed meeting organised by the Belgian Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations at the request of the (rotating) Irish EU presidency brought together for the first time the two relevant EU working groups on terrorism (Council Working Group on Terrorism – International Aspects or COTER and the Terrorism Working Group or TWG) with the police and intelligence

---

<sup>11</sup> *Washington Post*, 24 December 2002.

<sup>12</sup> *The Worldwide Threat in 2003: Evolving Dangers in a Complex World*. Available at: [www.nti.org/media/pdfs/18.pdf?\\_1316466791](http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/18.pdf?_1316466791).

services of the Member States to discuss terrorist recruitment. Participants tried to determine whether top-down recruitment by international networks such as al-Qaeda or instead bottom-up self-recruitment were the main avenue by which individuals were drawn into terrorism.

The Irish EU presidency acted upon the discussions at this conference. In May 2004, a first ever common (confidential) assessment of the 'Underlying factors in the recruitment to terrorism' by the two EU working groups (COTER and TWG) attempted to identify the root causes of radicalisation, essentially understood as 'anger among Muslims or Islamists'. The report was largely inspired by recent intelligence assessments (originating from the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and a limited number of Member States). It warned that the 'processes by which individuals are drawn into terrorism [were] very complex. [...] Accordingly, generalisations must be viewed with great caution'.

Radicalisation was still explicitly linked to recruitment by foreigners: 'Recruitment to terrorist organizations is preceded, in many cases, by a process of radicalization, where an individual may become attracted to extremist ideologies. There are a number of factors that may contribute to this, although the specific process of radicalization can vary from individual to individual.'

The potential causes of this anger were considered wide-ranging: regional conflicts and failed or failing states (and the perception of Western double standards), globalisation and socioeconomic factors, alienation, propagation of an extremist world-view, and of systems of education (madrasas). In summing up the possible root causes of the anger, the paper clarified the puzzling reference to alienation of youngsters in foreign countries in the ESS. This did indeed refer to youngsters both inside and outside Europe:

Within Europe, young Muslims may often feel themselves to be subject to discrimination and participate relatively little in mainstream politics and public life. In this context of sometimes real grievances, a lack of any real opportunities to effect change or vent frustration and a consequent sense of anger and helplessness, the unambiguous messages of extremist propaganda can become very attractive, particularly to the youth population.

This wide array of underlying factors was not put in any specific order of priority, nor really operationalised. But it was the very first time an EU document had mentioned 'radicalisation' in relation to terrorism.

The 'radicalisation process' was accordingly represented as the ultimate stage of recruitment to terrorism for a minority of radical Muslims. This recruitment was in turn to be understood as a wide-ranging and strategically planned endeavour by 'Islamist terrorist organisations' who were 'looking for and identifying potential recruits and then monitoring and manipulating these people to achieve an internal-

ised radical political-Islamic conviction, with the final purpose of having them participate in the jihad in one way or another'.

But in its concluding paragraphs, the May 2004 document also mentioned the new bottom-up trend, reported earlier by police and intelligence services, of 'self-motivated young radicals [...] who have had no physical contact with recruiters and who have been mobilised by extremist ideological messages encountered over the internet'.

At the end of 2004, the Dutch AIVD was the first Western intelligence service to state publicly that radicalisation could also be a process of 'autonomous' recruitment (through self-initiated radicalisation), without the mediation of a 'real' recruiter.<sup>13</sup> The murders of the libertarian Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn by a lone wolf activist in 2002 and, still more so, of the movie director Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a young member of a loose grouping of radicals, all of Moroccan descent and born or raised in the Netherlands (with the exception of one or two converts to Islam), turned the spotlight on home-grown terrorism.

Moreover, this report for the first time attempted to define 'radicalism' (distinguishing it from extremism) and 'radicalisation'. Radicalism was defined as:

The (active) pursuit of and/or support to far-reaching changes in society which may constitute a danger to (the continued existence of) the democratic legal order (aim), which may involve the use of undemocratic methods (means) that may harm the functioning of the democratic legal order (effect). In line with this, radicalisation can be interpreted as a person's (growing) willingness to pursue and/or support such changes himself (in an undemocratic way or otherwise), or his encouraging others to do so.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the earlier internal EU assessment of May, the AIVD privileged an essentially ideological understanding of the process of radicalisation, disconnected from the potential political, social and economic causes of radicalisation originally understood as 'anger'. The Dutch intelligence service no longer mentioned the domestic context and its broad range of conceivable root causes, and instead focused on the 'purely religious ideological component of radical-political Islam, which plays an increasingly important role in many countries (including the Netherlands) both on a national level and on an international level'.<sup>15</sup> What was originally only one of the possible root causes of radicalisation now became a major prism through which to examine the process. Even if inside the EU some Member States – including the Irish Presidency at that time – warned against the pitfalls of involving

---

<sup>13</sup> *From dawa to jihad*. The Hague, AIVD, December 2004, p. 40; *Annual Report 2004*. The Hague, AIVD, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> *From dawa to jihad*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Islam as a religion in the debate (in a classified EU-wide message on 4 February 2004), the ideological prism nevertheless became a major factor in the emerging consensus on radicalisation as the core approach to understanding contemporary terrorism.

The AIVD went to great lengths to distinguish between different forms of 'radical Islam', only to conclude that all of its forms – religious, apolitical or violent – constituted a threat, albeit of different natures, and were thus a matter for follow-up and investigation by intelligence services.

This turn to an ideological prism produced a second set of competing narratives, with important policy consequences. Even 12 years on, this still bedevils and obscures the issue of radicalisation, making it a source of persistent ambiguity. If radicalisation is decontextualised and primarily considered an ideology-driven process, then a counter-narrative (instilling individuals with less radical ideas) is an appropriate way of blocking its spread. But if the context is the primary factor in the emergence of radicalisation, then proposing a counter-narrative will be irrelevant or of only limited use. Moreover, the latter approach makes a suitable counter-strategy much harder to conceive, since it implies taking a hard look at drivers within one's own domestic environment and dealing with an extraordinarily broad range of issues.

Alongside the evolving thinking within the intelligence community and the European Commission, the Madrid bombings clearly acted as a milestone, not only for enhancing European coordination in counterterrorism, but also for pursuing the enquiry into root causes.

Within the European Commission, officials were, however, reluctant to use the concept of 'root causes'.<sup>16</sup> They feared that it could be hijacked by radicals in the Basque region or Northern Ireland to justify their terrorist tactics. But they were also convinced of the need to address underlying factors and thus to go beyond the mere law enforcement that constituted the traditional core of European counterterrorism. Without tackling upstream the context that had engendered the current wave of 'Islamic terrorism', they feared that the European polity would be undermined by a growing polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims and between natives and migrant communities. They thus seized the opportunity offered by this emerging concept of 'radicalisation', judging it to be more neutral than 'root causes'.

---

<sup>16</sup> At the end of 2006, the EU decided to henceforth forsake the use of the words 'root causes' and now instead prefers other terms, such as 'underlying conditions' or 'conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism', which is the expression that has been endorsed in the UN Counterterrorism Strategy. The reason for this shift in wording (the EU still used the words 'root causes' in its 2005 Counter-Terrorism Strategy), was the experience of the EU in discussions with third countries, especially at the UN. Those discussions had indicated that the term was subject to misinterpretation. The word 'causes', in particular, was sometimes misused by those who would like to imply that some terrorist acts could be excused or justified by seeking to establish an automatic causal link between circumstances and, as a direct result of them, terrorism.

They were nonetheless aware of the inherent dangers in advancing this concept. Not only did they realise that it was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon at the intersection of individual pathways and a societal context, but they also comprehended that radicalisation was not to be criminalised, lest freedom of speech and the very essence of liberal democracy were endangered. The concept must also not be hijacked by anti-migrant and anti-Islam pundits and movements, thus endangering the social fabric of the EU.

In October 2004, the European Commission for the first time released a public paper referring to 'radicalisation', accompanied by the qualification 'violent'.<sup>17</sup> Speaking of 'disrupting the conditions facilitating the recruitment of terrorists', it evidently echoed the May 2004 report and the intelligence assessments. Moreover, the Commission announced that it intended to draw upon 'the expertise of the European Monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia, experts and researchers', with the aim of identifying 'where European policies and instruments can play a preventive role against violent radicalisation'. The Commission also made plain that it intended to boost intra-European cooperation in this field and thus to enhance its role in a policy domain that was still largely dominated by intergovernmental decision making.

The two EU counterterrorism working groups drew up a second joint report in November 2004. It zoomed in on the personal trajectories of individuals and privileged ideological factors over the contextual factors that had been prominent in their first report as the sources of eventual anger. The Netherlands now held the rotating EU presidency. This partly helps to explain the shift from context to ideology (nowadays often dubbed as 'narrative'), since it reflected the stance taken by the Dutch intelligence service. But one might also consider this to be the result of a common-sense organisational process of narrowing down a complex phenomenon into an operational approach. A strategy that intended to dry up all the possible root causes of anger among youngsters was doomed to be a whole-of-government approach, extremely wide-ranging, complex, time consuming and spanning virtually all imaginable policy domains, far beyond the classical realm of counterterrorism. Concentrating upon individual pathways seemed, on the contrary, to have the benefit of simplicity. Focusing on the process an individual undergoes from his or her original 'normal' status to becoming a terrorist seemed a lot easier than addressing the environment that made him or her vulnerable to the siren song of extremism.

Accordingly, the November report identified a number of particular 'hot spots' where radicalisation processes were likely to occur (certain mosques, schools, ghettos, the internet). But the report now also insisted that it tended to take place via loosely connected networks and individuals rather than through specific organisations dedicated to the task. This unmistakably indicated that the original idea of an

---

<sup>17</sup> *Prevention, preparedness and response to terrorist attacks*. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. COM(2004) 698, 20 October 2004.



external recruiter actively taking the lead in the process of radicalisation had given way to bottom-up dynamics. The report mentioned that while 'exogenous factors' (i.e., the role of al-Qaeda as a leading factor in radicalisation) had somewhat diminished, 'endogenous factors have an increasing influence on radicalisation'.

On the second set of competing narratives (ideology vs context), the report now clearly leaned towards the ideological prism, just as in the Dutch AIVD report. While contextual factors were not entirely neglected – underlying factors such as social deprivation or lack of integration were indeed mentioned – the emphasis was nevertheless clearly on the ideological process of the individual:

A univocal definition of radicalisation cannot be given. At the same time it is clear that individuals can move from mainstream Muslim beliefs and practices towards Islamist extremism. This may be motivated by a potential confrontation with western society, though other factors also can play a role here such as justification of criminal activities, peer pressure, the appeal for 'justified' violent behaviour.

## TOWARDS AN EU STRATEGY FOR COMBATING RADICALISATION AND RECRUITMENT TO TERRORISM

In December 2004, the European heads of state and government decided to elaborate a strategy and action plan to address radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism. It had now become a consensus view within the EU that in the long run the Union's response to terrorism had to address the 'root causes of terrorism', as the Council decision stated. It called on the Council to establish a long-term strategy and action plan on both radicalisation and recruitment by June 2005.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside the ongoing work that had started within the Commission after the March train bombings, the EU Council secretariat initiated a comprehensive effort of consultation and information-gathering on radicalisation under the guidance of Gilles de Kerchove, then director for Justice and Home Affairs.

The July 2005 bombings in London acted as a further booster for counterterrorism work and thinking at EU level. While holding the EU presidency in the second half of 2005, the United Kingdom proposed streamlining into a single overall framework the wide variety of ad hoc measures that had been undertaken since 9/11. This would mirror the structure of its own recently adopted counter-terrorism strategy (which itself had been influenced by the ongoing work within the European Commission on a counterterrorism strategy).

Radicalisation as prism for understanding and countering terrorism was now rapidly gaining traction within EU counterterrorism thinking. The Commission announced in September 2005 that it was establishing 'a network of experts for the sharing of research and policy ideas which will submit a preliminary contribution on the state of knowledge on violent radicalisation in the beginning of 2016'.<sup>19</sup> This document defined violent radicalisation as 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism[...]'. The document once again stressed that this was 'a very complex question with no simple answers and which requires a cautious, modest and well-thought approach'. It was also adamant in warning against the use of the words 'Islamic terrorism'. Stating that no religion tolerates, let alone justifies, terrorism, the document emphasised:

The fact that some individuals unscrupulously attempt to justify their crimes in the name of a religion [...] cannot be allowed in any way and to any extent whatsoever to cast a shadow upon such a religion [...]. Stating this fact clearly

---

<sup>18</sup> *Presidency Conclusions*. Brussels European Council, 16238/1/04 Rev 1. 16-17 December 2004.

<sup>19</sup> *Terrorist recruitment: addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council and. COM(2005) 313, 21 September 2005.

is, in the Commission's view, the first requirement for the Union in the fight against violent radicalisation.<sup>20</sup>

The emerging consensus on the concept of 'violent radicalisation' should not be overstated, though. Quite the contrary. Most EU Member States were of the opinion that the emphasis should be on preparedness and protecting the public from the immediate threat of terrorist attacks. Moreover, in the absence of a univocally agreed definition of radicalisation, elusiveness was the dominant characteristic of the discussions that followed. A small number of Member States, together with the Commission and the Council Secretariat, were adamant about addressing contextual factors in view of long-term sustainable results in counterterrorism efforts.<sup>21</sup> But listing possible root causes was easier than addressing them through concrete policies.

This becomes clear when viewing the parallel evolution of the UK counterterrorism strategy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In 2003, the UK government launched CONTEST (Counter Terrorism Strategy). It contained four priorities: *Pursue*, *Prevent*, *Protect* and *Prepare*. *Prevent* remained for a long time the least developed strand of CONTEST, as the focus instead fell on protecting the public from the 'immediate threat to life [...] rather than understand[ing] the factors driving radicalisation'.<sup>22</sup> In 2006, the *Prevent* strand of CONTEST passed from the Home Office to the newly created Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) under the label Preventing Extremism campaign (re-named Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) a year later).

The UK government still largely subscribed to the same analysis of the root causes of radicalisation as the original May 2004 EU assessment:

There are a range of potential factors in radicalisation and no single factor predominates. It is likely the catalyst for any given individual becoming a terrorist will be a combination of different factors particular to that person. [...] Potentially radicalising factors include the development of a sense of grievance and injustice.

This might arise from the terrorist's version of recent events and developments, such as: the process of globalisation; the presence of Western troops in Muslim countries; double standards in the West's international behaviour; specific conflicts, such as the 1991 Gulf War; the sense of personal alienation or community disadvantage, arising from socioeconomic factors such as discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of opportunity; and exposure to radical ideas. However, 'None of these factors is

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Annex, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Rietjens, 'België, de EU en het jihadi-terrorisme'. In *Studia Diplomatica*, VX, 2007, Supplement 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism*, March 2009, p. 82.

conclusive and they are probably best viewed as considerations which may influence radicalisation.'<sup>23</sup>

Acknowledging the breadth of the challenge and the need to focus on the 'prevent' strand of the strategy, the United Kingdom also stated that: 'Ultimately, however, this is a battle of ideas in which success will depend upon all parts of the community challenging the ideological motivations used to justify the use of violence.'

This in turn was reminiscent of the ideological prism that had been suggested in the AIVD report of December 2004.

The European Commission itself was firmly in favour of maintaining a broad approach to upstream prevention at the heart of European counterterrorism efforts. Building a critical mass to sustain its attempts was one of the motivations behind Commission officials' desire to gather together this Expert Group. It wanted to pool existing academic knowledge on different types of radicalisation in order to identify the core characteristics of the process as a necessary basis for devising adequate counterstrategies.

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the heads of state and government in their December 2005 Council meeting, while still defining terrorism as an external phenomenon ('much of the terrorist threat to Europe originates outside the EU'), now also endorsed the home-grown radicalisation challenge that needed to be addressed.<sup>24</sup> It took some discussion among the Member States, but by identifying 'Prevent' ('preventing people turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment, in Europe and internationally') as the first of the four strategic objectives, the EU clearly stressed the preventive work that needed to be undertaken to combat terrorism in the long term.

The other strategic objectives were: 'Protect' (sheltering citizens and infrastructure from attacks), 'Pursue' (pursue and investigate terrorists and their networks across EU borders), and finally 'Respond' (enhancing consequence management mechanisms and capabilities used in case of an attack in one of the Member States).

As part and parcel of this new overall strategy, the European Council simultaneously adopted the Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, thus confirming that radicalisation had become one of the central threads in Europe's 'root cause' approach to counterterrorism. This document called for a better understanding of the 'motives behind such a decision [i.e., to become involved in terrorism]' and for a way to 'identify and counter the ways, propaganda and conditions through which people are drawn into terrorism and consider it a legitimate

<sup>23</sup> HM Government, *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy*, July 2006. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/272320/6888.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/272320/6888.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> *The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. Council of the European Union, 14469/4/05 REV 4, 30 November 2005.

course of action'.<sup>25</sup> The strategy recognised that radicalisation was rooted in the domestic context of the Member States: within the Union too, structural factors existed that might create disaffection and susceptibility to the overtures of extremists, such as social and economic inequalities among relevant minority groups.

This was plainly spelled out in the accompanying (classified) Action Plan, which almost exclusively dealt with factors in the domestic realm. In an attempt to operationalise the complex mosaic of root causes that had been identified since 2004, the Action Plan defined three venues for specific action: 'facilitational factors' (disrupting the activities of terrorist networks), 'motivational factors' ('ensuring that voices of moderation prevail over those of extremism') and 'structural factors' ('promoting yet more vigorously security, justice, democracy and opportunity for all'). In the last dimension, EU Member States were exhorted to 'combat those who exacerbate division by inciting racism, xenophobia and specifically Islamophobia' and to target resources to reduce existing inequalities. Member States should consequently 'develop and promote full and active engagements of all citizens in their communities'.

By the end of 2005, radicalisation had become the holy grail of European counterterrorism. But under this apparent unanimity, major ambiguities existed as a result of competing narratives. Firstly, while the political discourse still very much focused upon the external realm, the home-grown dynamics advanced by the practitioners had by now become the essence of the threat. Secondly, even if 'root causes' were increasingly embraced as an idiom, the focus was split between insistence on the context and the seemingly more practical approach of looking into individual pathways, with ideology or the narrative as the privileged culprit.

---

<sup>25</sup> *The European Union Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism*. Council of the European Union, 14781/1/05 REV 1, 24 November 2005.

## THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S EXPERT GROUP ON VIOLENT RADICALISATION

Commission officials who had been energetically advancing the need for upstream prevention nevertheless realised that not much was known about what happened in the black box labelled 'radicalisation'. They also acknowledged that the relationship between radicalisation and terrorism was poorly understood. Why, how and when individuals became involved in terrorism had indeed never been thoroughly studied in the past.

At its beginnings in the early 1970s, terrorism researchers have been debating the contextual causes of terrorism. According to Martha Crenshaw's landmark article in 1981, context is of the essence in understanding terrorism. Context not only accounted for the instigating circumstances that permitted terrorism's emergence, it also provided situational factors that motivated and directed groups and individuals to use violence.<sup>26</sup> Some experts in terrorism and political violence such as Martha Crenshaw, Donatella Della Porta and Ted Gurr had insisted early on that it was moreover important to look into the interaction between psychological considerations, group dynamics and societal context to understand terrorism's emergence. According to Crenshaw in 1981, terrorism was not an automatic reaction to given conditions, and terrorists only represented a small minority of people who experienced the same conditions. But answering the question of why specific individuals engaged in political violence was a complicated problem, 'and the question of why they engage in terrorism is still more difficult'.<sup>27</sup>

Fraught with methodological difficulties and confronted with a seemingly endless stream of factors to be taken into consideration, the why-terrorism-occurs research failed to gain traction. Instead, the focus shifted to more practical policy-orientated studies and crisis management analyses.

Within intelligence and police services too, the context was considered a sufficient explanation of why individuals chose terrorism. Throughout, for example, the long history of Northern Ireland's counterterrorism efforts, individual trajectories never played a major part in assessing and countering the threat:

[...] what is called radicalisation today, in the past was referred to do much more mundanely as 'becoming' a terrorist, 'joining' a terrorist group, or of being 'recruited'. No one talked of the IRA being radicalised, or Shining Path,

---

<sup>26</sup> Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism'. In *Comparative Politics*, 1981, 13:4, pp. 379-399.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 390..

or Black September or the Red Brigades. Though all of these older groups certainly were by our modern understanding.<sup>28</sup>

Commission officials were evidently aware of the intricate, interlinked and complex nature of the issues involved, and the way in which they defied easy answers. How and why do individuals embrace radical ideas? How do ideas (ideology, religion) translate into action? Are psychological or socio-familial profiles a way forward in identifying potential terrorists? What is the interaction between context and individual pathways? What is the role of systemic factors? And how can all this be operationalised in policy? The endeavour was thought to be rewarding, though: if one could succeed in understanding how these sequences worked, it was assumed, it might be possible to devise adequate strategies to extract individuals (or groups, for that matter) from radicalisation and thus turn them away from terrorism.

As previously mentioned, Commission officials started to screen leading authors in several fields that might be helpful in deepening the concept of violent radicalisation. Experts with different academic backgrounds ranging from Islamic studies to deviant behaviours (studying subcultures like skinheads, radical rightists and leftists, those who enacted political violence, gang members) to international politics were invited to join the group. Fernando Reinares from the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid was appointed as its chair.<sup>29</sup> This policy advisory group was tasked with preparing a synthesis report on the existing knowledge in the field of violent radicalisation. Originally planned for June 2006, it was only by 15 May 2008 that the final report was submitted to the Commission, as a result of a series of personal and practical difficulties that had hampered the group from the start (by mid-2007, one of its members even thought the group was dead).

In its report, the group re-stated that the concepts of 'radicalisation' and 'violent radicalisation' had originated in EU policy circles after the 2004 Madrid bombing, and that they had not been widely used in social science as a concept. They cautioned against the ambiguity of these concepts, since no uniform usage existed in social sciences and humanities. Moreover, 'radicalisation' in connection with terrorism was qualified as inherently confusing as a result of its relationship to 'radicalism' as an expression of legitimate political thought:

---

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Silke and Katherine Brown, 'Radicalisation: The Transformation of Modern Understanding of Terrorist Origins, Psychology and Motivation'. In Shashi Jayakumar (ed.), *State, Society, and National Security: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2016, pp. 129-150. My Dutch colleague Martijn de Koning has mentioned a rare instance in the recent past when an intelligence service has used the notion of 'radicalisation'. In 1992, the BVD (precursor to the Dutch AIVD) referred to a tendency of 'increasing radicalisation or fundamentalisation of Muslim communities abroad', without, however, making explicit to what or whom it was referring. In Martijn de Koning et.al, *Eilanden in een zee van ongeloof. Het verzet van activistische da'wa-netwerken in België, Nederland en Duitsland*. Nijmegen, Radboud University, IMES Report Series, 16 December 2014, p. 150.

<sup>29</sup> The list of members and their affiliation, as well as the text of the report is available at: [www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20080500\\_cscp\\_report\\_vries.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20080500_cscp_report_vries.pdf).

Radicalism as advocacy of, and commitment to, sweeping change and restructuring of political and social institutions has historically been associated with left- and right-wing political parties – at times even with centrist and liberal ideologies – and involves the wish to do away with traditional and procedural restrictions which support of the status quo. As an ideology, radicalism challenges the legitimacy of established norms and policies but it does not, in itself, lead to violence.

The Expert Group thus suggested an alternative to the concept of 'radicalisation':

While radicalism can pose a threat, it is extremism, and particularly terrorism, that ought to be our main concern since it involves the active subversion of democratic values and the rule of law. In this sense violent radicalisation is to be understood as socialisation to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism.

Drawing on their pooled expertise, the experts explicitly rejected any exclusive link with a specific religion, e.g., Islam. They noted on the contrary that 'remarkable similarities [exist] between radicalisation to current Islamist or jihadist terrorism and radicalisation associated with left-wing, right-wing or ethno-nationalist terrorism in Western Europe since the 1960s'. It is probably useful to quote this assessment in full:

Past and present waves of violent radicalisation which lead to terrorism among mainly young people share certain structural features.

Firstly, radicalisation thrives in an enabling environment that is characterized by a more widely shared sense of injustice, exclusion and humiliation (real or perceived) among the constituencies the terrorists claim to represent. [...] Nothing creates so fertile a breeding ground for political radicalisation than the feeling of belonging to the camp of those left behind in the progress of mankind but at the same time upholding potent and aspirational symbols of empowerment.

Secondly, radicalisation always takes place at the intersection of that enabling social environment and individual trajectories towards greater militancy.

Thirdly, terrorist violence [...] stands only at the far end of a wide repertoire of possible radical expressions and only a small number of radicals become terrorist extremists. Indeed, even radicalisation into violence short of terrorism is not a prevalent phenomenon among the vast majority of citizens of the European Union and only a tiny minority of newcomers succumb to it.

To make clear their point that 'radicalisation' was an exceptionally complex, gradual and phased process, they noted that:



One of the most significant understandings gained from academic research over recent years is that individuals involved in terrorist activities exhibit a diversity of social backgrounds, undergo rather different processes of violent radicalisation and are influenced by various combinations of motivations. This is relevant not only with respect to the more recent expressions of Islamist terrorism but also as regards right-wing, left-wing and ethnonationalist manifestations of such violence previously experienced in a number of European countries.

And insisted that:

[...] there is not any single root cause for radicalisation leading to terrorism but a number of factors may contribute to it. Precipitant ('trigger') factors vary according to individual experience and personal pathways to radicalisation. For instance, historical antecedents of political violence, excessive repression by state authorities in the recent past and profound social changes (in Europe or in the country of origin) may, under certain conditions, contribute to a polarized social climate in which confrontation rather than conflict resolution becomes the preferred option. Yet personal experiences, kinship and bonds of friendship, as well as group dynamics are critical in triggering the actual process of radicalisation escalating to engagement in acts of terrorism against civilians.

Therefore, they also cautioned against the already palpable tendency of confounding manifestations of increased religiosity among Muslims with political radicalisation:

Today's religious and political radicalisation should [...] not be confounded. The former is closely intertwined with identity dynamics, whereas the latter is boosted by the aforementioned feelings of inequity whether real or perceived. Both expressions of radicalisation processes are thus the result of very different individual and collective dynamics.

What then was the role of ideology (and religion for that matter) in the processes leading to terrorism? The group clearly distanced itself from the burgeoning trend in the United Kingdom and some other Member States of considering ideology as a primary driver. Ideology acted as a vehicle to reduce potential moral inhibitors and as a justification of the resort to extreme actions such as terrorism, but not really as a driver:

Clearly, the espousal of a particular ideology does not guarantee that a radicalisation process will ensue. Many other elements and their interplay must be present for the individual to progress through the personal and social transit that radicalisation into violence entails. In fact, previous studies of several European terrorist groups have made clear that ideology had a varying

degree of relevance in that process. Moreover, individuals in need of an ideological framework very often develop an instrumentalised cut-and-paste interpretation of a given ideology in order to justify their recourse to violence.

In this, Jihadi Salafist ideology was not altogether different from other violent extremist narratives:

In previous decades, ideologies tended to produce violent and terrorist repertoires in Italy and Germany when political opportunities triggered activation and escalation. In depth interviews with IRA members support the analysis that the political situation and the social juncture at the time rather than ideology was a decisive variable in the process of radicalisation. The same can be said of Italian or German militants of left-wing and right-wing underground organisations.

In a similar vein, the reason why many right-wing and skin-head youths joined racist groups was not because they were particularly endeared to racist ideologies but rather because of the attraction that stems from the fulfillment of a number of social and psychological needs such as identity, community protection or simply excitement. It has been demonstrated that some of them gradually adopted racist views once inside the group whereas others left the group after a brief interlude with the collective.

By comparing the role various ideologies played in different historical examples of terrorist campaigns, the Expert Group filled a void in the academic literature identified by Martha Crenshaw in 1981.<sup>30</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s too, different paradigms for the primary focus in understanding the causes of terrorism co-existed. Some centred on social factors, but others identified revolutionary ideologies as the main culprit. But the lack of historical, geographical and transnational comparative propositions meant that most of those early explanations lacked overall explanatory value.

Finally, since it was asked to provide policy advice, the Expert Group expressed scepticism about the efficiency of one-size-fits-all deradicalisation programmes. As a result of the wide variations observed in processes of radicalisation into violence, it judged it 'futile to try to develop strategies for preventing these processes as no such measures will be able to fit them all.'

But in their concluding remarks, the group recommended examining past and current individual, tailor-made exit strategies in, for example, Scandinavia and Germany, in which they emphasised as particularly relevant the conceptual distinction between de-radicalisation as a cognitive process and disengagement as a behav-

---

<sup>30</sup> Crenshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

itorial process that implies discontinuing involvement in terrorism (the former being extremely challenging). Since they realised that the Member States would undoubtedly embark on devising deradicalisation programmes, they insisted these should be evaluated in order to provide evidence on what worked and what did not.

For reasons that were never made wholly clear to the group, but were most likely rooted in turf wars within the Commission, after it completed its first study in May 2008, the EC Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation was de facto discontinued by the French Commissioner Jacques Barrot. Even if Commission officials and public Commission documents sometimes still referred to the report, it went largely unnoticed for many years before receiving renewed attention long after its official submission.

## PULL OF A CONCEPT

It would require a huge leap of faith to imagine that if the report had been made public it would have made any difference. Radicalisation proved irresistible as a concept. Because of its apparent simplicity, but also its inherent ambiguity, it got embroiled in the concerns over immigration and integration that had developed since the 1980s, and with the unease over Islam and Muslims boosted by the 9/11 attacks. The concept was all the more tantalising because of the pre-existing popular idiom of ‘radical Islam’<sup>31</sup> and the ubiquity of the ‘clash of civilisations’ paradigm since 9/11.

University of Exeter scholar Jonathan Githens-Mazer made this point neatly:

When applied to Islam and Muslims, the term radical is often being used interchangeably and opaquely with terms such as fundamentalist, Islamist, Jihadist and neo-Salafist or Wahabbist with little regard for what these terms actually mean, and instead indicate signals about political Islam that these members of the media and politicians wish to transmit.<sup>32</sup>

Radicalisation made it possible to speak about these issues in a way that seemingly differed from the anti-Islam rhetoric of right-wing pundits and movements. But in the end radicalisation nevertheless came to be seen as a unique and contemporary process linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena – exactly what the Council Secretariat, the Commission and its Expert Group had hoped to avoid.

In 2004, the head of Scotland Yard’s counterterrorism command, Peter Clarke, was probably among the first officials to warn the media against labelling today’s main terrorist threat as ‘Islamic’, since this was both offensive and misleading.<sup>33</sup> But this is exactly what happened.

The central position the concept of radicalisation acquired in policy, law enforcement and academia as the holy grail of counterterrorism contributed significantly to the shift in focus from context to individual, as Mark Sedgwick has pointed out, ‘the concept of radicalisation emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances’ and the context in which it arises.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Fareed Zakaria, ‘The End Of The End Of History’. In *Newsweek*, 24 September 2001. See also: Christopher Allen, ‘Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European Union and British Contexts’. In *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 2004, 21:3, pp. 1-25.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Githens-Mazer, *Rethinking the Causal Concept of Islamic Radicalisation*. Committee on Concepts and Methods, January 2010, p. 8. Available at: [www.concepts-methods.org/Files/WorkingPaper/PC%2042%20Githens-Mazer.pdf](http://www.concepts-methods.org/Files/WorkingPaper/PC%2042%20Githens-Mazer.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Sedgwick, ‘The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion’. In *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2010, 22: 4, pp. 480-481.

In media and official discourse – but also in deradicalisation programmes – radicalisation lost its inherent complexity and was often narrowed down to a radical narrative that an individual 'caught' as if it were flu and which then inexorably pushed him or her to its seemingly logical end, terrorism. A 'radical' – when in fact a 'literalist' is meant – reading of the Quran and the hadith was subsequently seen as the vestibule of jihadism, Islam as implicitly related with terrorism, and Muslim minorities as a disloyal 'fifth column'<sup>35</sup>.

This focus on the 'evil ideology' as the main culprit for radicalisation leading to terrorism had two obvious advantages that explained its success. Firstly, it narrowed down the inherent complexity of addressing the wide array of possible root causes that would have required a whole-of-government approach and turned it into a seemingly more manageable task of targeting the individuals involved. It thus became easier to devise counterstrategies that would prevent an individual from becoming a terrorist. Secondly, and more importantly, putting all the blame on the individual effectively decontextualised the concept of radicalisation. It allowed a disregard of the crucial share the wider society has in the emergence of factors that give rise to the 'anger', as radicalisation was originally understood.

The respected terrorism scholar Alex Schmid, former Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN and member of the Expert Group, made this point in the best review on the state of research on (de-)radicalisation to date:

[...] we have to admit that in the final analysis, 'radicalisation' is not just a socio-psychological scientific concept but also a political construct, introduced into the public and academic debate mainly by national security establishments faced with political Islam in general and Salafist Jihadism in particular. The concept was 'pushed' to highlight a relatively narrow, micro-level set of problems related to the causes of terrorism that Western governments faced in their efforts to counter predominantly 'home-grown' terrorism from second and third generation members of Muslim diasporas.<sup>36</sup>

To be fair, the plethora of radicalisation studies produced since 2004 has nevertheless yielded useful and intriguing results. As Andrew Silke and Katherine Brown recently argued:

Our understanding of how people become involved in terrorism and violent extremism has transformed since the turn of the century. That transformation occurred at the same time that 'radicalisation' took over as the dominant framework for considering questions around terrorist psychology, motivation and recruitment. Yet, is it a case that the major breakthroughs in under-

---

<sup>35</sup> Githens, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Alex Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. The Hague, ICCT, March 2013, p. 19.

standing have happened because 'radicalisation' is a genuinely useful concept that has facilitated this progress? Or is it simply the inevitable result of the massive amount of research which has been focused on terrorism and terrorists in the wake of 9/11?<sup>37</sup>

To summarise my own take on the results of these studies, I understand radicalisation first and foremost as a socialisation process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are often more important than ideology. Studies have provided us with a more detailed understanding of the stages in this process, which is similar to other forms of deviant behaviour. The process of socialisation into extremism and, eventually, into terrorism, happens gradually and requires a more or less prolonged group process. Feelings of frustration and inequity first have to be interiorised and then lead to a mental separation from society (which is considered responsible for those feelings). Individuals then reach out to others who share the same feelings and create an 'in-group'. Within such a group, personal feelings get politicised ('what are we going to do about it?'). Groupthink gradually solidifies into an unquestioned belief system and attitude, with alternative pathways gradually being pushed aside. In this process, ideology helps to dehumanise the outside-group and transforms innocents (who bear no responsibility for the original feelings of frustration and inequity) into guilty accomplices.

Radicalisation studies have indeed furthered our understanding of what happens to individuals once they get involved in a process that can ultimately result in terrorism. But the emphasis on the individual has been detrimental to the 'why-terrorism-occurs approach' advocated in terrorism research since the 1970s. The 'how' has become clearer, but the reasons 'why' individuals and groups have become (once more) vulnerable to an extremist narrative have become opaque. The complex interaction between context, individual and group processes is now often reduced to a question of narrative. Where radical-right pundits and politicians made Islam itself the core issue, others pointed at the orthodox, or literalist, or Salafist (these terms being used interchangeably) readings of the religion. But both accusations were similar in that they interpreted 'radicalisation' essentially as the adoption of extremist ideas, which in turn was said to transform a person via a logical and phased process into a terrorist.

The United Kingdom's evolving position appears to have been decisive in this shift of emphasis within the EU towards seeing the individual with ideology as the main culprit and accordingly the primary target of counterterrorism. In 2007, a revised *Prevent* strategy was approved by the UK government as part of what was popularly known as CONTEST II. *Prevent* was now to be at the forefront of counterterrorism work. In contrast to the earlier versions of *Prevent*, ideology was identified as the

---

<sup>37</sup> Silke and Brown, op. cit.

number one factor driving radicalisation, while the wider domestic issues were relegated to the back of the queue under the general heading of 'a range of domestic issues, including racism, inequalities and the experience of criminality and migration'.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the first stated objective of the revised *Prevent* was 'to challenge the ideology behind violent extremism and support mainstream voices'.<sup>39</sup>

Up to this moment, ideology had been only one among the many possible root causes that led individuals to turn to terrorism. It now became the dominant paradigm for countering terrorism. Sensitive to critiques that *Prevent* targeted specific Muslim practices and risked associating outward signs of traditional religious practice such as wearing the hijab or growing a beard with terrorism, the UK government changed the name of the programme from 'Preventing Extremism' into 'Preventing Violent Extremism'. The government intended to clarify that it was only targeting the specific threat from al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism (as opposed to Muslims per se). By putting the focus on the criminal act of violence, the UK government attempted to distance itself from portraying terrorism as a purely religious problem.<sup>40</sup>

This distinction was largely erased after David Cameron's Conservative-led coalition government entered office in 2010. Non-violent ideologies now also became the target of governmental counterterrorism action, as David Cameron made clear: 'The root cause of this threat to our security is quite clear. It is a poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism that's condemned by all faiths and faith leaders.'<sup>41</sup> Other governments have since followed suit. The Dutch AIVD published a follow-on report on the long-term threat of (non-violent) Salafism to democracy and social cohesion, which was much more alarmist than its 2004 assessment (but it withdrew somewhat from this stance in 2009, only to return to it in 2014).<sup>42</sup> The Netherlands (and other EU Member States) are now embroiled in a vigorous public debate on the relationship between Salafism and jihadism, the former being called the conveyor belt to the latter.

Following the January 2015 attacks in Paris, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls also endorsed this approach: 'We have an enemy, and we have to identify it as such, it's radical Islam and one of its elements, Salafism'.<sup>43</sup> His Belgian colleague Charles Michel also opined that the culprit is 'a fanatical ideology that want to impose its obscurantist vision through extreme violence'.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> *Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare*, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>39</sup> *Preventing Violent Extremism*. House of Commons, Communities and Local Government Committee, Sixth Report of the Session 2009-10, 30 March 2010, p. 6. Available at: [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 9, 33 and 39.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian*, 29 August 2014.

<sup>42</sup> *The radical dawa in transition. The rise of Islamic neorealism in the Netherlands*. The Hague, 2007; see also n2.

<sup>43</sup> Manuel Valls before the National Assembly, 18 November 2015. Quoted in *Le Monde*, 25 November 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Michel quoted in *Le Monde*, 1 February 2016.

By 2010-11, the ideological paradigm had become for many the chosen prism for attempts to answer the question of why individuals turn to terrorism. As noted earlier, this was partly the result of a bureaucratic shortcut, borne out of the requirement of simplifying an extremely complex phenomenon into operational and manageable policy objectives. But, more importantly, it neatly plugged into the existing public debate on Islam, integration, multiculturalism and the place of religion in the public sphere.

But this turn to individuals and to ideology courted much controversy. Persistent criticisms were being raised about the absence of scientific robustness, its unintended consequence of stigmatising Muslim communities as 'the problem', and the neglect of other drivers of radicalisation.

In the United Kingdom, many argued that *Prevent* had been flawed at its inception in both design and implementation. It was said to overplay the role of religion, while socioeconomic factors and deprivation were mostly overlooked. Questions were also raised about the robustness of government analysis of factors leading to recruitment into violent extremism:

The causal link between recruitment and underlying socio-economic conditions leading to vulnerability seem to have been included but not emphasised adequately by government in its approach, preferring to focus on security and religion. Problems of discrimination, hate crime, deprivation, identity and the impact of an unpopular foreign policy need greater emphasis. All these factors make the vulnerable more susceptible to ideologies of violence and add to feelings of disconnection from the state and a government failing to meet needs.<sup>45</sup>

At one point, the UK government conceded – as the European Commission's Expert Group had already stated in 2008 – that 'it is evident that there is no single pathway to radicalisation, just as there is no single profile of a person who is vulnerable to radicalisation. New insights will be circulated to local partners.'<sup>46</sup>

In the Netherlands, the burgeoning 'deradicalisation industry' of consultants and researchers, funded and sanctioned by the authorities, came under criticism. Commercial bureaus specialised in courses training both prevention and security officials, without anyone being able to determine the effectiveness of their work. As in the United Kingdom, the overriding religious paradigm in countering terrorism was criticised and appeals were made to 'de-Islamise' the issue and consequently the envisaged policy recipes.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> *Preventing Violent Extremism* (House of Commons), op. cit., p. 25, 30-31 and oral evidence 114.

<sup>46</sup> HM Government, *Delivering the Prevent strategy: An updated guide for local partners*. March 2009, p. 9. Available at: <http://www.moray.gov.uk/minutes/data/SSS20090910/Item%2011%20appendix%201.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> *De Volkskrant* (Dutch newspaper), 31 October 2009.



The EU itself long tried to maintain its more holistic approach, as opposed to that of most of its Member States. In 2010, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström insisted that more had to be done 'to address the situations of individuals on the margins of our society and to reduce their susceptibility to radicalization'.<sup>48</sup> In 2011, she launched (together with the European Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove) the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), an EU-wide umbrella of practitioners and researchers created to identify best practices at the local level but also to encourage continuing research on the drivers of radicalisation. Four years later, RAN was transformed into a Centre of Excellence to collect and disseminate expertise on (counter)radicalisation.

These controversies and the shifting focuses in and between EU Member States, but also within the EU counterterrorism community as a whole, kept the very concept of radicalisation as elusive as it had remained since its introduction. It also prevented the emergence of a robust, research-supported political consensus as to what in the end was the most adequate way of addressing the issue.

When the US government in its turn faced the issue of home-grown terrorism, it chose to rebrand it altogether into 'Countering Extremist Violence' or CVE. Did this amount to mere cosmetics – or did it succeed better in grasping the issue?

---

<sup>48</sup> Does Europe need 'Homeland Security'? SDA Roundtable Report, June 2010.

## CVE, THE AMERICAN TWIN CONCEPT?

In 2009, young Americans of Somali descent living in Minneapolis went on a suicide mission in Somalia. They were soon followed by a group of American Muslims from Virginia who travelled to Pakistan supposedly to join the Taliban. This came as a shock to many in the American counterterrorism community and the public at large.

Until that point, home-grown Islamist terrorism was considered a quintessentially European phenomenon, borne out of a failed integration policy and the large-scale discrimination Muslims were said to face in Europe. American Muslims, so it was long assumed, were well-integrated and often lived in affluent suburbs rather than poor ethnic enclaves as they did in Europe. Suddenly, 'jihadi terrorist radicalisation' no longer appeared to be limited to the Old World. American experts even started to warn that a new generation of home-grown extremists was about to become the most insidious threat to the United States. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano acknowledged that this represented a paradigm shift: 'We can't operate in the paradigm that if they attack us, they would be coming from other countries into the United States. We have some that are homegrown. That is a change.'<sup>49</sup>

Authorities and observers realised that this phenomenon had largely been under-examined in America and that their understanding of it remained limited.<sup>50</sup> This was why American authorities suggested a high-level transatlantic meeting on the topic of radicalisation – the 2010 gathering referred to at the beginning of this paper. Representatives of the relevant US federal agencies, including the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Council and community leaders met with their peers from the EU as well as from Member States. While the Europeans referred to the EU jargon of 'radicalisation and recruitment into terrorism', the Americans most often used 'Violent Extremism' as their preferred idiom.

'Countering Violent Extremism' had been launched within the framework of the State Department's global counterterrorism approach. It was based on the recognition that even the best 'intelligence operations and law enforcement efforts alone' would not be sufficient in countering the 'long-term challenge' posed by al-Qaeda. According to Daniel Benjamin, the State Department's Counterterrorism Coordinator from 2009 to 2012, the aim of CVE was to 'make environments non-permissive for terrorists seeking to exploit them'. This required a broad range of 'non-coercive' instruments, such as messaging, capacity-building, outreach to civil society and

---

<sup>49</sup> Peter Baker, 'Inside Obama's War on Terrorism'. In *New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Sibel McGee, 'Review of Would-be Warriors: incidents of Jihadist terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001'. In: *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, 7:1, 2010, p. 1.

educational campaigns.<sup>51</sup> Soon, it was also adopted as banner for the domestic counter-radicalisation programme of the US government.

The American participants at the conference in Brussels raised the exact same questions that the Europeans had been struggling with since the inception of the concept of radicalisation in 2004. They also faced the same divergent strategies.

Some suggested that the very core of an integrated American counter-radicalisation strategy should consist of an ideological counteroffensive, based upon the assumption that: 'extreme actions are the consequence of an extremist mindset'.<sup>52</sup> Based upon an 'invaluable dialogue with the United Kingdom's Home Office', a bipartisan Presidential Study Group set up by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, opined that 'today, there is growing consensus that countering the ideology that drives this extremism is a critical element in the overall effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it.'<sup>53</sup>

But, echoing the early European assessments of the need to address the broad array of root causes in order to effectively counter the emergence and the spread of terrorism, John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, set out the parallel approach:

[...] any comprehensive approach has to also address the upstream factors—the conditions that help fuel violent extremism. Indeed, the counterinsurgency lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan apply equally to the broader fight against extremism: we cannot shoot ourselves out of this challenge. We can take out all the terrorists we want—their leadership and their foot soldiers. But if we fail to confront the broader political, economic, and social conditions in which extremists thrive, then there will always be another recruit in the pipeline, another attack coming downstream [...] addressing these upstream factors is ultimately not a military operation but a political, economic, and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people: security for their communities, education for children, a job and income for parents, and a sense of dignity and worth.<sup>54</sup>

In the United States, the second approach prevailed. In 2011, the US government released both a new global counterterrorism strategy (in June) and its first national strategy to prevent violent extremism domestically (in August). The latter explicitly

---

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in: *Preventing violent radicalization in America*. Washington, Bipartisan Policy Center, June 2011, p. 17. Available at: <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/NSPG.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2009, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Brennan's Speech on 'A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans', August 2009. Available at: [www.cfr.org/world/brennans-speech-new-approach-safeguarding-americans-august-2009/p20001](http://www.cfr.org/world/brennans-speech-new-approach-safeguarding-americans-august-2009/p20001).

stated: 'Violent extremists prey on the disenchantment and alienation that discrimination creates, and they have a vested interest in anti-Muslim sentiment.'<sup>55</sup>

The principles on which the American strategy was built are not wholly transferable to the European context, but contain nevertheless elements that have also been raised in the European debates. A clear preference for local ownership is one of them: 'Countering radicalization to violence is frequently best achieved by engaging and empowering individuals and groups at the local level to build resilience against violent extremism.'

The US strategy relied on a broad range of tools and capabilities, emphasising in particular the strength of local communities and institutions as central to its approach. Moreover, instead of the European inclination for specific deradicalisation arrangements, the United States has decided to build its efforts 'from existing structures, while creating capacity to fill gaps as we implement programmes and initiatives. Rather than creating a new architecture of institutions and funding, we are utilizing successful models, increasing their scope and scale where appropriate'.

Echoing a British discussion on the drawbacks of the inclusion of *Prevent* in the overall counterterrorism effort, the American strategy further acknowledges that:

The vast majority of our engagement work relates to issues outside the national security arena, such as jobs, education, health, and civil rights. We must ensure that in our efforts to support community-based partnerships to counter violent extremism, we remain engaged in the full range of community concerns and interests, and do not narrowly build relationships around national security issues alone.

Finally, and very forcefully, the Obama administration strategy emphasises that the United States is not at war with Islam:

[...] we must counter al-Qa'ida's propaganda that the United States is somehow at war with Islam. [...] Islam is part of America, a country that cherishes the active participation of all its citizens, regardless of background and belief. [...] Government officials and the American public should not stigmatize or blame communities because of the actions of a handful of individuals. [...] Strong religious beliefs should never be confused with violent extremism.

Three local pilot programmes were initiated in Boston, Los Angeles and Minneapolis. Each city created an action plan consisting of prevention frameworks tailored to addressing the local and specific root causes and community needs identified.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Empowering local partners to prevent violent extremism in the United States*. August 2011. Available at: [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering\\_local\\_partners.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf).

Addressing the 'underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism' has since become a constant theme for the US government, including the president.<sup>56</sup> But it seems that operationalising these principles into policy was as hard in the United States as it was in the EU. Concrete results for the domestic counter-radicalisation effort are as hard to gauge as European efforts. Despite a couple of high-level international meetings to identify best practices and millions of dollars of government-sponsored research, answers to the questions of why someone becomes a terrorist and how potentially problematic behaviour can be identified remain elusive in the United States too. Here as well, the temptation to narrow down complex processes to simple checklists of suspect behaviour was difficult to resist. And when an individual comes across authorities' radar as being potentially of interest: 'there is no policy on what the response should be. The Obama administration envisions a network of counselors, religious figures and experts who can step in to help. With rare exceptions, such a network has not materialized.'<sup>57</sup>

The three pilot programmes themselves took quite some time to materialise. In Minneapolis, the same happened as in the British *Prevent*: accusations of racial profiling and of subjecting the entire Somali community to scrutiny undercut the credibility of the government's community outreach programme to fight violent extremism.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Remarks by the president at the National Defense University, 23 May 2013. Available at: [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university); President Obama's Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 24 September 2014. Available at: [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly).

<sup>57</sup> Matt Apuzzo, 'Who will become a terrorist? Research yields few clues'. In *New York Times*, 27 March 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Ron Nixon, 'Minnesota TSA Manager Says He Was Told to Target Somali-Americans'. In *New York Times*, 27 April 2016.

## THE THREE DRAWBACKS OF RADICALISATION AND CVE

Radicalisation is now firmly entrenched in the heart of European counterterrorism, as is CVE in both America's international and domestic counterterrorism efforts. The latter concept has even become a global brand name for many countries' efforts to combat terrorism.

In a strange reversal of roles, some European governments have now adopted the stance of the George W. Bush administration and refuse to consider root causes. After the November 2015 Paris attacks, the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls insisted that there could be no search for explanations for the atrocities because 'explaining is already condoning somehow'.<sup>59</sup> The Obama administration in turn now subscribes to the original European broad root-causes approach, at the very moment that European governments are abandoning this in favour of using an exclusively ideological prism to counter jihadism.

This by itself already illustrates the enduring ambiguities and shifting focuses of the concept of radicalisation (and CVE), 12 years after its introduction in the EU counterterrorism community. It is thus time to assess its added value.

Firstly, the concept of radicalisation (and of CVE) didn't live up to expectations. Surely we have reached a better understanding of the process of socialisation into extremism that manifests itself in terrorism. This has long been an understudied issue. But, as mentioned earlier, this still doesn't answer the vexingly simple question as to exactly why, how and when some individuals do turn to terrorism and others don't – which would have been a crucial step in identifying terrorists in time and was one of the factors contributing to the pull of the concept.

'Radicalisation' has essentially become a catch-all. Many different expressions of an individual's ideas and behaviour are mixed together as 'signs of radicalisation', and these range from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox preachers, radical ideas, and the terrorist acts themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labelled 'indicators of radicalisation' emptied the word of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.

Contrary to what some had assumed, we now know that such trajectories or pathways are neither fixed nor predetermined, but highly 'individualised and nonlinear, with a number of common "push" and "pull" factors but no single determining feature'.<sup>60</sup> We also know that there is no path dependency between the

<sup>59</sup> 'Car expliquer, c'est déjà vouloir un peu excuser.' Quoted in *Le Parisien*, 9 January 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Ben Emmerson, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*. Geneva, Human Rights Council, UN, 22 February 2016 (A/HRC/31/95).

acquisition of radical ideas and the actual turn to violence. Stated plainly: it is not the narrative (i.e., the ideology) that eventually lures an individual into terrorism. Indeed, kinship and friendship bonds often precede ideological commitment to the cause of terrorism. Case studies confirming that group dynamics – not religion or ideology – are the primary mover for an individual sliding into terrorism are plentiful. The complexities of this process of socialisation into extremism has defied easy operationalisation and thus the effective counterstrategies hoped for when the 'radicalisation' concept first emerged.

Moving beyond the individual and into the root causes, again there is no more consensus on the drivers that turn extremism into terrorism than there was at the time that Martha Crenshaw wrote her landmark article in 1981. Today, the same questions are being raised as in 1981 and even 2004, when the concept was introduced to EU counterterrorism thinking. The persistent lack of consensus on the drivers of radicalisation helps to explain why deradicalisation programmes tend to be a potpourri of objectives of all kinds, from cohesiveness to repression to counter-narratives. The sheer number of possible drivers for extremism has also created the temptation to narrow them down into manageable lines of approach, such as a checklist of 'indicators of radicalisation'.

This has been a factor, albeit not the primary one, in the European penchant to finally turn to ideology as the main driver of the process of socialisation into extremism, notwithstanding all the research that indicates the secondary role of ideology in this process. Many first-line prevention workers have discovered that theological or ideological discussions are indeed mostly pointless when dealing with 'radicalised' individuals.<sup>61</sup> By privileging ideology over context, however, the challenging task of devising a multifaceted whole-of-government strategy could be bypassed. It also meant that all the blame could be offloaded onto the radical individual and that the instigating circumstances that are inherently part of the social environment and context in which that individual lived could be downplayed. Accordingly, the share society has in the creation of these breeding grounds for radicalism could be dismissed. But the primacy of ideology in countering violent extremism and radicalisation continues to be challenged both within Member States and within the EU counterterrorism community.

All this explains why the focus of deradicalisation has shifted so often and why different Member States follow different and even competing tracks. The persistent lack of consensus on the drivers of radicalisation has been a major reason why the concept itself remained notoriously elusive.

---

<sup>61</sup> Michel Teller, *Faire face à la radicalisation violente: le soutien aux familles*. Compte rendu des séminaires, September 2015 – January 2016. Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, April 2016, pp. 12-13.

Secondly, in hindsight it appears that the concept of radicalisation did indeed have major drawbacks as some warned at its inception. Due to its ambiguity, it unwittingly helped to consolidate the popular Western image of Muslims as a suspect community. It reinforced the existing image of both Islam as an imported and threatening value system and diaspora communities from Muslim-majority countries as factors external to Western societies. This had major operational and political consequences. It created unwelcome suspicions between law enforcement and the Muslim and local communities, which were detrimental to the security agencies' abilities to gather information. If the ideological (and religious) frame of reference had not gained the traction it did, the relationship between communities and authorities would probably have been less stymied. It would have been easier to obtain crucial information from within the communities concerned. A comparison with Northern Irish terrorism makes this lost opportunity clearer. Andrew Parker, the head of the British agency MI5, made this comment on the lack of community support for terrorism in Northern Ireland:

We (...) detect and disrupt the vast majority of their attempts. But occasionally we are all stung with the tragedy of wanton murder, as we saw most recently with the shooting of David Black last November. Rejecting the political process in Northern Ireland, these ragged remnants of a bygone age are in a cul-de-sac of pointless violence and crime with little community support. We will continue to work with the police to put these thugs and killers in front of the Courts.<sup>62</sup>

Jihadi terrorism also enjoys as little community support as the Northern Irish sectarian extremists referred to by Andrew Parker.<sup>63</sup> But the focus on ideology when dealing with the former has obscured this parallel.

Politically, it put the social fabric under further pressure by reinforcing pre-existing attitudes and sentiments in the Member States of the EU, linking immigration with terrorism. The once quintessentially radical right-wing stance against Islam has been joined by a rigorous anticlerical stance on the Left in some kind of a combined anti-Islamic *Kulturkampf*, propelling a fierce debate on the compatibility of Islam with Western values.

As a result of its specific tradition of individual freedom of expression, the current US administration is much more apprehensive of the adverse consequences of such a fierce debate. The 2011 domestic counter-radicalisation strategy warns that 'a backlash against Muslim Americans [...] would feed al-Qa'ida's propaganda that our

<sup>62</sup> Address by the Director General of the Security Service, Andrew Parker, to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Whitehall, 8 October 2013. Available at: [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/10366119/MI5-chief-security-speech.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/10366119/MI5-chief-security-speech.html).

<sup>63</sup> <http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011>.



country is anti-Muslim and at war against Islam, handing our enemies a strategic victory by turning our communities against one another'.

David Petraeus, former commander of the coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and former CIA director, went further. Without referring to the presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump by name, he stated that:

I have grown increasingly concerned about inflammatory political discourse that has become far too common both at home and abroad against Muslims and Islam, including proposals from various quarters for blanket discrimination against people on the basis of their religion. [...]the ramifications of such rhetoric could be very harmful — and lasting. [...] As ideas, they are toxic and, indeed, non-biodegradable — a kind of poison that, once released into our body politic, is not easily expunged. [...] those who flirt with hate speech against Muslims should realize they are playing directly into the hands of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. [...] such statements directly undermine our ability to defeat Islamist extremists by alienating and undermining the allies whose help we most need to win this fight: namely, Muslims.<sup>64</sup>

The culturalist paradigm, through which the diasporic communities' culture came to be viewed as the major obstacle to their integration, pushed themes such as discrimination, disadvantaged socioeconomic position and unemployment in the immigrant communities to the margins. These faded away from the public discourse. A social question came to be seen through an essentially cultural lens.

This, in turn, has hindered the debate on the place of religion in the public sphere and, more specifically, the emergence of an European Islam marrying modernity and Islamic values. Surveys in the early 2000s nevertheless clearly highlighted the fact that European Muslims' worries were essentially the same as those of their non-Muslim neighbours: they worried about their future, and they were more concerned about unemployment than cultural or religious issues.<sup>65</sup> According to the producers of these surveys, Europe's Muslims were part of the social mainstream:

They side with Islamic moderates, not fundamentalists, and the overwhelming majority reject extreme tactics like suicide bombing as a way to win political objectives. These Muslims express more temperate views of Westerners than those in the Middle East or Asia. A majority also express favorable opinions of Christians and have less negative views of Jews. (...) While Europe's Muslim minorities are about as likely as Muslims elsewhere to see

---

<sup>64</sup> David Petraeus, 'Anti-Muslim bigotry aids Islamist terrorists'. In *Washington Post*, 13 May 2016.

<sup>65</sup> *Muslims in Europe: Economic worries top concerns about religious and cultural identity*. Pew Global Attitudes Project, 6 July 2006; Sara Silvestri, *Europe's Muslim women: potential, aspirations and challenges*. Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, November 2008; Nadia Fadil, 'Muslim girls in Belgium: individual freedom through religion?' In *ISIM Newsletter*, 2003:13, pp. 18-19.

relations between Westerners and Muslims as generally bad, they more often associate positive attributes to Westerners – including tolerance, generosity, and respect for women. And in a number of respects Muslims in Europe are less inclined to see a clash of civilizations than are some of the general publics surveyed in Europe. Notably, they are less likely than non-Muslims in Europe to believe that there is a conflict between modernity and being a devout Muslim.<sup>66</sup>

Instead of creating a non-hostile atmosphere that might have favoured a more spontaneous emergence of a European Islam, the feverish debates in the European public sphere precluded any meeting of minds. They reinforced pre-existing fears of an ethnic threat posed by minorities and strengthened the tendency to withdraw within one's own imagined community.

These counterproductive drawbacks of the concept of radicalisation could have been avoided if the ideological and religious prism had not gained the notoriety it did. Echoing a similar remark in the 2008 Report of the European Commission's Expert Group, Tulane University scholar Christopher Fettweis argued that 'there is no important practical difference between terrorism on behalf of political ideology and that on behalf of religion'.<sup>67</sup> Once again, an episode in the long history of terrorism in Northern Ireland sheds an instructive light on the enduring structural characteristics of terrorism, both old and new:

From a comfortable couch in his London living room, Sean O'Callaghan [a former paramilitary with the Irish Republican Army] had been watching the shaky televised images of terrified people running from militants in an upscale mall in Kenya. Some of those inside had been asked their religion. Muslims were spared, non-Muslims executed.

– God, this is one tough lot of jihadis, said a friend, a fellow Irishman, shaking his head.

– But we used to do the same thing, Mr. O'Callaghan replied.

There was the 1976 Kingsmill massacre. Catholic gunmen stopped a van with 12 workmen in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, freed the one Catholic among them and lined up the 11 Protestants and shot them one by one.<sup>68</sup>

Thirdly, the efforts put into devising programmes and strategies to 'deradicalise' people have often amounted to re-inventing the wheel – but with unintended adverse consequences. Better schooling, better housing, countering discrimination and racial hatred, job perspectives, addressing vulnerabilities related to mental

<sup>66</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, 22 June 2006

<sup>67</sup> C. J. Fettweis, 'Freedom fighters and zealots: Al Qaeda in historical perspective'. In *Political Science Quarterly*, 2009, 124:2, p. 277.

<sup>68</sup> Katrin Bennhold, 'Behind Flurry of Killing, Potency of Hate'. In *New York Times*, 12 October 2013.

health or psychological difficulties, etc., have all long since been identified as worthy objectives in their own right to create a more equal and inclusive society. However, by putting them under the umbrella of counterterrorism, they became part of a negative objective (preventing terrorism) instead of a positive endeavour (a caring society, with equal opportunities for all). Prevention workers often refused to be integrated into a security-related programme. From the moment that prevention policies were no longer seen as an objective in their own right, suspicion set in. This has been a constant criticism addressed to the United Kingdom's *Prevent*, but it has been an issue in the United States too (Minneapolis).

In many European states, prevention tactics have been under financial strain for at least two decades. It would be ironic and counterproductive if these same programmes were once more considered for funding but only as part of a security-centred endeavour.

The same argument applies to CVE in external operations. What is the added value of the labels 'counterterrorism' or 'Countering Violent Extremism' when dealing with today's major crises? The Taliban in Afghanistan, Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and Libya, or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Mali are not just terrorist organisations, but rather insurgencies that use terrorism as supplementary tactics. These organisations have been able to tap into local disenchantment, marginalisation or political exclusion to establish authority (however tenuous) over large swaths of territory. In short, addressing such crises is beyond the tools of counterterrorism, let alone CVE, according to Scott Stewart at Stratfor.

[...] in places with long-standing social and political grievances, jihadists have grown strong and threaten the very foundation of governments. It's not surprising that countries like Afghanistan and Yemen have seen both communist and jihadist revolutions. In environments like these, jihadists become much more than a problem of policing or countering violent extremism; they require a concerted counterinsurgency effort using military force. But military force alone is not enough to defeat an insurgency.<sup>69</sup>

The Stratfor analyst thus suggests resorting to the old notion of 'COIN' or counterinsurgency, rather than counterterrorism, in order to find appropriate recipes. One of the main lessons of COIN operations in bygone days has been that insurgencies cannot be defeated by firepower alone (let alone air power by external powers). The Stratfor analysis also noted this. But by and large, EU Member States' involvement in places like Mali, Syria and Iraq has been dominated by military operations reminis-

---

<sup>69</sup> Scott Stewart, 'Why firepower alone can't destroy jihadism'. In *Stratfor, Security Weekly*, 4 February 2016; Michael J. Boyle, 'Do counterterrorism and counterinsurgency go together?' In *International Affairs*, 86:2 (2010), pp. 333-353.

cent of the ill-fated US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and justified by a similar Global War on Terrorism discourses.<sup>70</sup>

One of the main lessons of COIN operations in the past has been that local conditions are crucial and it is these conditions that should be the target of concerted action, however difficult. Following an era of ill-fated COIN operations and the fall of the Iron Curtain, a new tool box has been developed as part of the post-Cold War goal of promoting good governance: accountability and anti-corruption measures, peace-building and conflict prevention, support to law enforcement (including security sector reform), political power-sharing schemes, empowerment of women, social and economic equality, etc.

Counterterrorism and CVE overlap with both COIN and good governance. As in domestic counter-radicalisation, existing programmes and arrangements are now increasingly being reframed as part of the fashionable new acronym, CVE. What exactly do counter-terrorism and CVE contribute as a separate, fully fledged policy domain with their accompanying instruments, beyond the combined traditions of COIN and good governance? Moreover, in the external realm, too, a wide variety of ad hoc measures have been taken that defy easy overview and evaluation. These are essentially the same challenges (de)radicalisation and CVE are facing within the domestic realm. It is thus not an easy undertaking to try to apply lessons learned in one domain to another, as is nowadays claimed within the European counterterrorism community. Since 2004, it has been common sense to emphasise the need to bridge internal and external security. But in the case of counterterrorism, radicalisation and CVE, this is even more challenging, as a result of the enduring ambiguity of the concepts involved and doubts concerning the effectiveness of deradicalisation endeavours.

---

<sup>70</sup> For a critical assessment of EU performance with regard to the MENA region, see the ECFR 2016 Scoreboard ([www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016/mena](http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016/mena)).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the point when they embraced the concept of radicalisation, European Commission officials evidently acknowledged it was just an oversimplification of an extremely complex process that defied easy, one-size-fits-all countermeasures. They were convinced, however, as were the early advocates of the concept, that without tackling the root causes of the 9/11 and the Madrid terrorist attacks, the social fabric of Europe would come under increasing strain. It was considered urgent to focus upon upstream prevention in order to drain the breeding grounds for disenchantment and grievances.

More than a decade later, the jury is still out as to the added value of this approach. As a concept, radicalisation has become part of our daily vocabulary, but when we consider the many realities to which the word refers, we cannot but conclude that it remains mired in controversy and confusion. Alex Schmid has suggested that the concept of radicalisation ‘suffers from politicization’ and that ‘like terrorism, too often means different things to different people, sometimes based also on different political interests’.<sup>71</sup> As a result, no satisfying metrics have ever been developed, notwithstanding the efforts of police, intelligence and academia.

The current wave of foreign fighters is viewed by many as evidence of a serious radicalisation problem. When taking office in October 2014, the incoming Belgian government stated in its coalition agreement: ‘The preservation of the democratic system and the safety of our citizens are for the government an absolute priority. Today, it is under pressure from a growing threat of radicalisation and terrorism.’ But is it? Is the current wave of foreign fighters indeed a sign of radicalisation of Muslim communities? And is radicalisation really the driver behind today’s foreign fighters phenomenon?

In January 2016, Europol released the results of a review compiled by police experts from the EU Member States of the dynamics of today’s foreign fighters. Surprisingly to some, it suggested dropping the term ‘radicalisation’ altogether. According to the review, religion was not the main push-factor behind the journeys undertaken to the Levant, nor was the decision to leave preceded by a more or less prolonged process, as has been assumed in the last decade:

Information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitment can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalisation process. Age plays a role. [...] In view of this shift away from the religious component in the radicalisation of, especially, young recruits, it may be more

---

<sup>71</sup> Schmid, op. cit., p. 19.

accurate to speak of a 'violent extremist social trend' rather than using the term 'radicalisation'.<sup>72</sup>

But the concept of radicalisation is by now too entrenched in polity and organisational discourse to be easily jettisoned. But one should be at least attempt to put it into proper perspective. As explained earlier, radicalisation is to an underlying factor what fever is to illness – a symptom. Sometimes, medicine against fever will alleviate the suffering, but as long as the illness is not cured, fever will continue to haunt the patient. In both cases – fever and radicalisation – an adequate diagnosis is crucial in countering the symptom. An inadequate diagnosis will, on the contrary, worsen the situation.

Firstly, remember that **all radicalisation is local**, as Special Forces Officer 'Tom' aptly opined during the first trans-Atlantic gathering on radicalisation in 2010. Rather than targeting ideology or narrative one has to look into the local context in order to identify the specific underlying factors, conditions and motivations for why groups and individuals protest, radicalise and sometimes turn to extremism and violence. A one-size-fits-all approach will fail – and this applies specifically to the ideological prism that has become widespread in EU counterterrorism endeavours. To state the obvious: what works in one country or county will not necessarily work in another country or even another county, let alone another continent – because underlying factors and context vary.

Secondly, **local empowerment is the first step to success in deradicalisation**. The importance of identifying the exact nature of local circumstances and the empowerment of local authorities and local communities is one lesson to draw from the experiences of cities such as Aarhus (Denmark), and Vilvoorde and Mechelen (Belgium). It has also been a central feature in the United States' 2011 domestic counter-radicalisation programme and in the United Kingdom's *Prevent* strategy:

[...] the main elements of our approach have been firstly to understand our communities better. That is because the nature of the way *Prevent* funding has come to us has made assumptions, I think, that the Muslim community is a homogenous group and our own experience has been that that is not the case, and therefore we have had an element which has been about social research, working with our local universities to understand our communities better and to understand our Muslim communities better.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks. Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015.* The Hague, Europol, 18 January 2016. Available at: [www.europol.europa.eu/content/ectc](http://www.europol.europa.eu/content/ectc).

<sup>73</sup> *Preventing Violent Extremism* (House of Commons), op. cit., p. 48.

'Deradicalisation' in this context means reconnecting individuals to the (local) society. As mentioned elsewhere,<sup>74</sup> tailor-made approaches have the best chance of succeeding if they are pursued at the local level and if three conditions are met:

- Since personal pathways are diverse, a personalised approach is required, whereby the person involved is seen as an individual, not as member of a (hostile) group;
- The person must be receptive to discussion. Hence the importance of identifying mentors or coaches and channels that can gain the person's trust and act as trust-worthy bridge-builders between communities, and between communities and authorities. These can be youth and social workers, a prevention official, an imam, a friend, a former extremist – depending upon the specific context and individual involved;
- Perspective must be offered. Reconnecting him or her to the (local) society is the goal. The aim should not be to attempt to change radical thinking, nor to lecture. Theological or ideological discussions are mostly pointless, according to the experience of many first-line prevention workers. The emotional dimension is paramount.

One has to acknowledge, however, as in all prevention programmes, that some push and especially pull factors are clearly beyond the means and realm of local authorities and communities. As a general principle, interventions of other levels of governance, including regional and national authorities, should aim to facilitate and not to hinder local empowerment.

Thirdly, **start de-emphasising deradicalisation and restore prevention in its own right**. The surest way for deradicalisation itself to become a grievance and thus a driver for 'radicalisation' is to 'securitise' relations with the communities at which it is directed. Securitising integration policies results in opposition to integration.<sup>75</sup>

Delinking prevention from deradicalisation will help overcome the suspicions that the former has become 'securitised' and has thus drifted away from its original goal, which is to contribute to creating equal opportunities for all in a fair and inclusive society. Taking into account new forms of disenchantment, grievances and social marginalisation and exclusion by adapting the scope and scale of existing structures and arrangements aimed at prevention will undoubtedly result in better long-term effects than creating a separate fully fledged 'deradicalisation' policy domain.

<sup>74</sup> Rik Coolsaet, *Facing the fourth foreign fighters wave. What drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State?* Brussels, Egmont-Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016, p. 50.

<sup>75</sup> *Preventing violent radicalization in America*, op. cit., p. 19; *Prevent Strategy*. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty. June 2011, p. 6. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf).

Fourthly, **separate the discussion on Islam in Europe from deradicalisation**. Discussion of a 'European Islam' is a discussion worth holding on its own merits and terms, with Muslims taking the lead. It should not be pushed within the deradicalisation framework. Not only will this not work as envisaged, it will also harden positions, corrode an already fragile social fabric and backfire. All should beware that the broader discussion on religion in the public sphere, which results from the secularisation of European societies, should not be hijacked to become a merely one-sided anti-Islam and anti-migration campaign.

Finally, keep the **limits to prevention** in mind. There has never been a silver bullet for prevention, and results will never be absolute nor straightforward. Measures taken against suicide and crime prevention tactics cannot offer a foolproof guarantee that suicides or crimes will no longer occur. The same applies to prevention aimed at reconnecting individuals to society. This implies that, in parallel to prevention measures, effective and resourceful policing, intelligence and law enforcement have to be in place – the traditional core of European counterterrorism. In the past, these have successfully contributed to managing and countering terrorist campaigns. Their role remains as crucial as ever in present-day counterterrorism.